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Single Mothers in the Changing American Family

Over the past 50 years the definition of a family has changed drastically. In the changing American family, single mothers have become more prominent. Pauline Irit Erera who is a professor at the University of Washington School of Social Work and author of “What Is A Family,” explores the unfortunate reality of what single mothers have to deal with. Lynn Olcott, a teacher in upstate New York at the Auburn Correctional Facility, provides an example of a single mothers’ struggle within the form of a personal essay, “Ballad of a Single Mother”. Tyler Perry, who is a popular play write, released a movie entitled *Good Deeds*. In the movie Perry provides a silver scream view of what struggles single mothers face and how they deal with them. All three works sources, although unique in their focus, share a common outlook on single motherhood. Erera, Olcott, and Perry seem to agree on what difficulties single women face. Those difficulties include, but are not limited to, not being able to properly provide for their family because they receive less pay as their male counterparts, not being able to find adequate child care, and working a long and hard day only to come home to work their second shift, by tending to their families every need.

In “What Is A Family”, Pauline Irit Erera explores the idea that women are not receiving the same pay as men. Erera states that “although paid far less than their male counterparts, a decreasing number of women [are] now employed and financially independent” (419). In terms of the independent lifestyle, single women are required to pay bills and support their children and themselves, but without equal pay, it is a struggle to make ends meet. Erera makes a point to add that women “[suffer] high rates of poverty, a legacy of social polices that especially disadvantages women and children” as an introduction to the issue of welfare (422). Erera points out that because of poverty, women had to turn to government assistance to make ends meet. Tyler Perry displays an inside look into a family’s struggle with what pay a single mother receives. As Lindsey struggles to pay her bills, she attempts to return home one night after to work to find that her and her child, whom she is working hard to provide for are being evicted from their apartment, and that they will now have to figure a new living situation. Although Lindsey and her child did not turn to government assistance, they were indeed subjected to poverty. Lynn Olcott provides an example of pay issues in “Ballad of A single Mother”. As the speaker, looks at her past, she addresses the issues she had with the low amount of money she received as pay, as well as other women who have the same issue. She proclaims “money was always a problem. Like most working women, I was underpaid and so were the women who cared for my children” (446). Olcott even provides hope for the future in “Ballad of a Single Mother”, the speaker ends the passage with best wishes for her granddaughter, after success, she wishes her the opportunity to receive wage equity (447). Although single motherhood is filled with monetary issues and wage equity, single mothers are also face the challenge of finding adequate and sometimes affordable childcare for their children while they work.

In Olcott’s essay, “Ballad of a Single Mother”, the personal story of a single mother gives testament to the difficulty of finding childcare. The speaker of the essay says she was brave enough on several occasions, to leave the care of her children in the hands of her neighbors. She makes it a point not to leave out the fact that by doing so she missed out on significant moments in her children’s lives (446). While looking back, she reflects by saying, “I would put my little baby, screaming, into the arms of my neighbor, Rosalyn” (446). In the movie *Good Deeds* Tyler Perry portrays Lindsey, the main character, as a single woman who cannot find childcare for her child while she works the night shift. Lindsey is forced to take her child with her while she worked due to the lack of childcare. She even hides her child in a janitor closet while she cleaned the office building. In terms of Pauline Irit Erera, she does not directly address the issue of childcare. Although Erera doesn’t speak on the issue based upon the information she provides in “What is a family”, Erera would acknowledge the fact that as a single mother, the second shift is a fact of life that they will face and that the second shift is only evidence of the different types of new family structures that are defining a family. Single mothers do not only have issues with finding childcare for the children while at work, but they also come home after working to a new job.

Single mothers also face a reality often spoken of in sociological terms called “second shift”. The “second shift” refers to the second job mothers or more so single mothers have once they have clocked out of their paying job. This shift is centered around the aspect of working single women who clock into their job of being a homemaker, nurse, caregiver, chef, mediator, or anything else her child or children may need, once at home and most times while still at work. By using the mirror image of the silver screen, Tyler Perry provides a look into the life of a mother who balances both her paying job and her second shift job at the same time in the movie *Good Deeds*. The mother in the film is rarely seen without having her child with her. While at work, due to inadequate childcare, is forced to “clock-out” of her job to “clock-in” to her motherhood job to check on her child while on site of her job. In the “Ballad of the Single Mother”, the speaker gives a personal account of her experience with the second shift while on her job sight as well She tells of the various times, at work when children (both hers and her co-workers) would call the office phone and ask to speak to their mothers. She categorizes these issues in with “ broken eggs and broken legs”. She mentions how women had to “clock-in” to second shift while on the paying job also. Pauline Irit Erera does not directly mention the issue of the second shift in “What is a family”, as mentioned Erera would categorize the second shift in with the changes of not only family’s structure but with the responsibility that single women are given.

In conclusion single motherhood is not grouped with the traditional family, but that does not mean that single mothers and their children are not considered families. Single women who are mothers face such adversities when it come to paying bill to secure shelter, food, and welfare of their children, finding great and reliable child care for their children while they work, and being all they can be to their child or children when they come home from work. The women who are single parents are strong women because even through those struggles they seem to always make it through the tough times and the backlash.

Work Cited

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